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FORBIDDEN MAGIC

There came to me a Man one summer night,
When all the world lay silent in the stars,
And moonlight crossed my room with ghostly bars.
He whispered hints of weird, unhallowed sight;
I followed – then in waves of spectral light
Mounted the shimmery ladders of my soul
Where moon-pale spiders, huge as dragons, stole –
Great forms like moths, with wings of wispy white.

Around the world the sighing of the loon
Shook misty lakes beneath the false-dawn's gleams;
Rose tinted shone the sky-line's minaret;
I rose in fear, and then with blood and sweat
Beat out the iron fabrics of my dreams,
And shaped of them a web to snare the moon.

R.E.H., 1929

FOR THE GLORY *OF THE* WORM

Young Toben, now of suitable age, approaches the founders' barn, as his father Horce has done (and his father's father) as have all men in the proud history of Porroughs Weldt, from its glorious founding through the drenched decades where nothing grew until the coiled spirits of the Worm and Wonder lifted its people to the dizzying, desiccant heights of today.

Horce urges him onward. "Inside now, boy, get on."

Inches away from the slightly ajar wooden door to manhood (as described to and transcribed by the family line of the Dethers up to and including this magickal moment), Toben's nose scrunches at the powerful stench of duty. "It smells awful."

"It's a barn. Go'on. You want to be a man, you need to meet the founder." Horce helpfully shoves the ungrateful whelp through the threshold. "Spare yourself another stretch in the wishing box and the lickin' you're due after."

The door slams shut, seemingly by itself. (This is important to preserve the mystery of adulthood to the child.) Toben speaks to himself, gathering grit and repeating the orders given to him and many more: "... is not scary, not scary, I'm not scared. Kneel and pray. Speak my name. Kneel..." And he does! "... pray..." While performing the prescribed gesture for doing so! "Toben Dillart."

All preparation behind him, he wait until glorious voice of the founder shakes his very soul:

TOBEN DILLART, LOOK UPON ME.
WITNESS MY PERFECT FORM, MY ABUNDANT FLESH,
CORPULENT WITH WONDER FOR THE WORM
SWOLLEN WITH THE GLORY OF PORROUGHS' WELDT!

Now twenty days a man, Toben sits a little further from the others in Missus Doromie-Glory Froad-Bredel's class-room, a place where him and others learn the mysteries of corpulence and desiccation. The cherished schoolmarm leads the class towards the end of their daily lesson in a warm chorus of knowledge: "De! Da! De! Di! Do! Du!"

The rejoinder of youth: "De! Da! De! Di! Do! Du!"

"With brio!"

"De! Da! De! Di! Do! Du!"

"Again now! Altogether, as if the senator was present!"

"DE! DA! DE! DI! DO! DU!"

Their voices repeat, fertile minds reeling on a carousel of truth of meaning until a loud **whack** halts them. Mrs. Froad-Bredel does not appear pleased. "Mister Wickson!"

All turn to the sandy-haired ingrate sitting behind Toben, the Wicksons' youngest named Jeral, whose fingers would not stop producing those horrid bits of chitin at the end, no matter how often Captain Albert cured them with his pliers and hot iron ladle. "Yes, missus Bredel?"

"What did I hear you say?"

In a fresh tone one might interpret as insubordination, Jeral

responds: "De. Da. De. Di. Do. Du."

"I specifically heard a sequence which clearly went," she forcefully clears her throat, "Dee. Dah. Dee. Die. **Doo**. Doo."

"I- I didn't, Ms. Bredel. I swear."

"Are you accusing me of dishonesty? Deception? Delusion? Or are you somehow implying I have come under the spell of some dementia?"

"No, Ms-"

"Is your assumption that the same ears that have infallibly assessed scores of students for the last 13 years are less reliable than those of a Wickson boy?"

"I didn't mean-"

Poor Doromie silences the insolence with another **whap** of her yardstick. The boy appears panicked, tears welling in his eyes, a sure sign of guilt. "Mr. Wickson, find your way to Captain Albert."

The boy rises from the chair to face the unfailing mistress Consequence. The schoolmarm grabs him by the arm and drags him to the door, instructing him on how to face responsibility with both words and firm hands. "Stand up straight. Raise your chin. Stop making a show of it and get to Captain Albert."

She opens the door and pushes him out. She turns to the class, resuming the lesson, *de-da-de-di-do-du*.

A pillar of the community and a rebuke to the weakness of modern men, Captain Albert stands tall on Gif's Perch, the fabled hill what overlooks the modest grey-green schoolhouse and the expanse of the now-desiccant lands of Porroughs Weldt, stretching

out for miles across a landscape dotted with its inhabitants' wooden homesteads and what many rotted-out tupelo carcasses still stand vigil, waiting to catch lightning from the gods to end their watch.

The captain leans alongside the mighty pin-oak at the top of the Perch – the only still-living tree in the Weldt's boundaries, saved as it was from the wetness of the bad times by its elevated position. The tree's forking trunk forms a v-shape what points down to what may appear to merely be a sturdy oak steamer. His good eye catches the pathetic sight of young Jeral, poised for another lesson in the wishing box, and he sighs to himself, bound by duty to guide the next generation of the Weldt into an adulthood in humble and desiccant service to the corpulent.

While not having children himself (due to parson's rot), Albert takes a stern but caring approach, kneeling to meet the boy's eye line. "Again, Jeral? D'ya have anything to say for yourself?"

Resigned, Jeral shakes his head. Albert lifts the lid of the trunk.

"Alright, lad. Into the box now."

Jeral climbs into the trunk and finds the closest position to comfort in its cramped, talcum-lined bowels.

"I'll have you out by first bell tomorrow." Albert closes the lid and withdraws a padlock from the front pocket of his tasseled, tattered old service coat. He takes a moment to look at it and thinks of Podge Mary, sweet as she was, giving a little bit of his eye's wetness to her. He kisses the air and seals the latch for wishing.

He scans over fields of sickly-yellow grass billowing in the breeze and takes a moment to pack and light his old pipe with mugwort, to think with fondness of the founder's gift and how he'd

keep these wayward kids in line during the senator's visit. Even in wishing the Wickson boy mightn't learn: Albert taps the box his boot, hoping to silence his muffled screams. "You'll only make it worse."

He strikes a match on a bit of flint clipped to his belt to light his afternoon smoke. Thirteen years ago mugwort scarcely grew, hardly nothing but those big blighted tupelos and a the willows of the grove, bloated with rot, and there was nothing but a big marsh almost, that's how many days the rain come down like that, and he thought he didn't have to worry about fighting no more but every day was one but his company was the fine folk of Porroughs Weldt and his general was the founder, hell he was the flag itself and all of the threads what make it. He kicks the box again; the screaming young would be made to understand.

Mind and pipe smolder as the unseen sun passes over the cloud cover what gives the village its signature gray timelessness, and what could be moments or hours pass unfelt until the school bell peals and the children exit single file, one-by-one, until the town's most beloved educator and pre-eminent scholar, Doromie Froad-Bredel, follows to lock up. She wisely chooses not to regard the Captain as he lumbers down the hill in heightened spirits.

"Missus Froad! How do you do?"

She turns the key twice counterclockwise, and once clockwise. "I'm well, Albert, and yourself?"

"Splendid! Can I ask, how were the day's lessons?"

She turns the key another three times clockwise, withdraws it, and places it into the next keyhole up. "Crucial, though I often fear these children may be lost."

Albert wrings his hands. Dearest Doromie rotates the key several times clockwise (pausing to try the door handle after every three or four turns) before she asks: "What do you want, Albert?"

"I wanted to..." The wetness in the eye again. His voice warbles. "I just... I wanted to thank you and the Lord Mayor for getting the senator out here. Honest."

The schoolmarm lifts her hand from the key and tenderly touches Albert's stubbly left cheek. "Oh, Albert. We'll all be happy and grateful when the senator comes. Don't you know that?"

Though still focused on the locking up, her eyes sparkle with hope. Entranced (and brimming with the founder's spirit), Captain Albert can only offer back the Affectionary: "I-love-you-we, Missus Froad."

"We-love-as-one, Albert."

They enjoy this moment, perfect and true, until the final lock is sealed.

In a triangle of held hands, The Dillarts – young Toben, father Horce, and mother Emb-Glory – conclude their dinnertime prayer in unison: "We-love-as-one."

It lacks jubilation, unbefitting of the evening's bounty of whole roast grackle, and to rebuke the lack of enthusiasm, Horce raises a grackle-greased finger in the air. "Look at my boy, Emb. Made a man twenty days now." He speaks with grand momentum, and in spite of the small bone lodged in throat from his first bite, he continues as if inspired by the Worm Itself. "Twenty days! Know what I did in the last twenty days? I tilled every square acre of this

land for twenty days and twenty nights – that is, the work of twenty men being the work of one man – digging at the roots, sharvening the rithers, hands blistered, flesh rended, sweat and blood and soil! I did with my hands what few men dare, giving my wetness to the dirt, to the weeds and turnips, to the catches of the grackle traps!"

He slams the table in defiance of the sour mood, of his dour son and cowering wife. Emb-Glory's eyes dart between Toben and Horce. Like an escaping bubble, a shriek erupts from her mouth. She covers it in quiet shame, and her husband's eyes bulge at his son.

Horce leaps from his stool. "Look what you've gone and made your mother do. Apologize!" Still idly gnawing at the stringy bits of bird, he points his meal's beak at his son. "Go on, be the man you say you are!"

Toben stands, faces his poor mother, and hangs his head in deserved shame. "Mother, I am sorry that I disappointed you." In a remarkable display of grace and mercy, Emb-Glory lifts her hand to her child's chin and offers a warm, forgiving smile to her husband. "You'll just have to do better next time."

Horce motions for his son to take his seat, unwilling to let the cur ruin the evening any further, when four loud knocks on the door (in the cadence of WE-LOVE-AS-ONE) interrupts the boy's reconciliation. Emb-Glory bows her head; Horce lifts his hand in allowance for his wife to greet their guests. She opens the door to a sprightly young man (one of the Weldt's finest) standing perfectly tall (thought angled slightly to the left, per the accident what shortened his lesser leg).

Emb-Glory beams. "Dearest Terry, we warmly welcome

your presence in our home!"

"Warm welcomes to you and yours, ma'am, but I'm merely passing a message. The Lord Mayor Froad's got a grove meetin' going in an hour, alls-together as the worm says."

"Oh, Terry! How wonderful!" She blushes and turns to her family, gripping her hands together and holding them above her rightside heart. "Wouldn't you know that our good Lord Mayor Froad has invited us to the grove?"

The resemblance to Horce is shown in Toben's response, of equal joylessness to his father's, spoken nearly in tandem by both (as is the custom): "Hurrah, tell the Lord Mayor we shall come, whole in head and whole in heart, to the grove, to the grove, to the grove."

Emb-Glory echoes the men of the house (though greater in spirit): "To the grove!"

Terry doffs his green-gray kepi cap. "To the grove, ma'am."

On Gif's Perch, Captain Albert lays his own kepi (in captain's style, of course, buckled with fine copper smelted from the founder treasured bed-frame) on the wishing box and scans the landscape shining golden as it does before twilight. The boy now silent and wishing, Albert's thoughts drift in smoked mugwort and sipped sloe gin, towards the senator and the prospects of the townsfolk and what might be going on at the grove, because even though Keel Yordge will stop by with fresh-caught fowl and fill him in tomorrow morning (if the morning is willed by the Worm), his anticipation turns his face the color of yew berries as he sees the people file family-by-family towards the knotted circle of hollowed-out

willow trees.

He withdraws a small telescope from his coat and counts them as they pass by, one by one, as he does with the children every day, and he thinks about how strong his eye might become when the senator approves the charter and a proper opitermologist or whoever can accept the Worm and pass into the peace of Porroughs Weldt and maybe even drain the sacs over his bad eye.

Just then, taking advantage of his limited scope and wandering mind, a creature (one unlike any he's ever seen, possibly one never seen by any one near or far) hops up on the wishing box, this beastly little thing the color of rust with cunning green eyes like his wicked Aunt Polly-Po-Glory (and little triangles poking out over them), it snatches poor Albert's hat in its narrow needle-toothed mouth and runs off before the captain can properly react.

The telescope's lens juts toward the direction of the strange orange-brown critter as it takes off for the southernly ridge what marks one of the hardest-fought boundaries of the village, beyond to where the thickets of juniper and blackthorn grow and only old Winhe can go. Captain Albert, electrified by the Spirit, whose very heart could be made of the same brass what made the buckle that held the heron-leather band of the hat tight, sets off after it and is never seen again.

Underneath a sparse patchwork of willow branches, nearly all of the Weldtsvolk (excepting young Jeral and the Captain) kneel in a semicircle facing the Lord Mayor Froad and his wise wife Doromie, both seated on thrones of wicker stained dark with the found-

er's oil. The only one standing in the grove is the Lord Mayor's caller Yance Dethers. After all finish chanting the Commenciary, Caller Dethers begins the pronouncement:

"The Lord Mayor, Persisent and Perseverant, Perfect and True, thrice duly elected to the highest honor in public service by the freeholders of Porroughs Weldt, bound by the duty of his position, calls upon the populace to ensure that the Esteemable Senator Fardys 'Hickory' Dinch feels at home among our people during his sojourn into the limits of our happy hamlet. The Lord Mayor Froad, sworn to the Worm to guide our people, has therefore drafted several declarations to be certified by the constituency he has so humbly and dutifully served and will in perpetuity until death or democracy deems otherwise."

He clears his throat, and all present rise to stand. "One. All sticks, tubs, pats, dollops, and stores of fowl lard will be required to fully satiate the esteemable appetite of a man of station and corpulence such as Senator Dinch. In anticipation of the feast, all such fats shall be rendered to Freeholder Jindal, whose larder and dear wife Bon-Glory standby in commitment."

The Lord Mayor offers the freeholder Lew Jindal a knowing nod and a smile. Caller Dethers raises the polished-brass Founders Rod: "Motion to proceed?"

The towns twelve freeholders affirm in unison: "Aye!"

"All in favor?"

"Aye!"

As is custom, the Lord Mayor is first to slap his hands together in applause. The Weldtsvolk join for the appropriate time (except for Doromie, who looks to the direction of the founder's barn, as

it is her duty to interpret any signs that may rise in the sky during meetings) before Dethers lowers the rod to signal silence. He clears his throat again and continues, voice growing ragged and hoarse. (As is customary, the caller must remain desiccant, and therefore no well-water or Winhe's sloe gin may pass his lips before his duty.)

"Two. Our Senator has little patience for the youth. As such, any minors found on the Village Green will be given Stern Reproach and confined to wishing boxes for the duration of the election season. Our Beloved Schoolmarm, Missus Doromie-Glory Froad-Bredel and the Deputy Captain Albert shall enforce these statutes as per policy." He lifts the rod. "Motion to proceed?"

Toben looks to the ground. His foot begins to dig into a small patch of wild onion poking above the grass. *Aye. Aye. Aye.* Declarations pass above his consciousness as it narrows focus on the grass and the dirt from which it grows, where the Worm sleeps, *aye*. Horce smacks him in the back of his head, but Toben knows he is a man now, and he knows the true shape of man because he saw it in the barn, heard the humming of the horseflies and felt nothing as they bit at his flesh, smelled the lingering rot of feasts past, year after year waiting for the Senator to arrive, year after year all of it fed to the founder, adding to his corpulence. *Aye. Aye.*

Toben considers the children whose wishes did not come true, their bones cracked open for Oldest-Glory Porroughs' many mouths to suck them clean, only to regurgitate the horrible meat into the gaping maw of the great worm what sucked away all of the land's wetness so turnip and clover could grow and feed the love of the people, the people who love-as-one, *aye aye, dee dah dee, die doe doo,* and he doesn't even notice his foot work out the wild onion from the soil until the eye of the Worm peeks through.

As the Weldtsvolk listen to the Lord Mayor as he speaks through the caller, Toben can only hear the chittering of the Worm as he saw it that day in the barn, its massive beak stripping shanks of the ever-growing flesh of founder Porroughs, whose many eyes gave wetness to the Worm in ritual demonstration of what it is to be expected of a man in his Weldt.

Toben then gave his wetness to the founder: first from his eyes, then from his outer flesh, then from within, and finally both the waste and wheat of his boys' glory rod, each deposit growing a large pustule on Old-Glory Porroughs' neck before it lengthened into a dimpled protrusion and squirted into the worm's chitinous maw. Satisfied, it withdrew into the large hole in the barn's center, the one the founder's mass was suspended over.

A darkness lifted from Toben. Everything made sense now. In jubilant glory, he proclaimed the Affectionary: "I-love-you-we."

Old-Glory Porroughs' many mouths smiled and spoke in unison: "We-love-as-one."

And as is custom, the founder granted the boy his wish, the one he thought only he could hear after Captain Albert locked him in the dry old wishing box with its hungry centipedes and sickle-bugs after Missus Bredel caught him glancing out of the window during lessons. This year, the senator would finally come to Porroughs Weldt.

Amos Quimb, the senator's truest and most trusted assistant, takes an extra moment this year to consider the strangely-written invitation the office receives annually from what's understood

to be uninhabited marshland deep in the back country. The race's young, brash upstart, P. James Mangam, a war hero and populist, just about carved out all of the senator's veteran supporters, and the drought made it so anyone with a patch of land to till (most of the state's voters) were out for anyone to blame and desperate for change. Equally desperate for votes, Quimb adds Porroughs Weldt to Big Hickory Dinch's itinerary.

The senator will witness the glory of the feast, a tableful of roast grackle and sparrow, turnips and wood-fungus basted in bird-fat, flagons of Winhe's special reserve of honeyed sloe gin, scores of smiling, wide-eyed townsfolk jabbering about glory and worms and fashioned like they were in his distant youth, some lunatic with a curtain rod croaking declarations, frightened children without fingernails ducking behind rotted-out tree stumps, and a locked wooden trunk on a hill stinking of death and decay.

Hidden among the dead tupelos, Toben Dillart and a clever red fox will witness the honorable Fardys Dinch lose contact with his entourage and get swept up in a grand parade led by Lord Mayor, and all the town's adults sing *De-da-de-di-do-du!* with great joy and brio as they dance and twirl towards the lone barn standing in the middle of a sun-scorched field, where Oldest-Glory Porroughs' corpulent form expands over the rafters. The procession will embody the Spirit, each person (and the senator himself) another segment of the great Worm, all loving-as-one, in dryness and wetness, desiccation and corpulence, and one by one they'll walk through the barn and plunge themselves into the dark abyss where the Worm stirs eternal in Glory and Wonder, Wonder and Glory, Glory and Wonder, Wonder and Glory, Glory and Wonder, Wonder and Glory, Glory and Wonder, Wonder and Glory, Glory and Wonder,

Wonder and Glory, Glory and Wonder, Wonder and Glory, Glory and

STILL LIFE

I was at the hospital visiting mom on the first day; she was in hospice following a diabetic stroke (itself following 68 years of processed food, functional alcoholism, and a sedentary lifestyle) when the adjoining patient behind the light-blue curtain flatlined. Only, by the time I had left – after an hour of holding mom's brittle, bruised hand – he was still alive. In defiance of the beeping monitors and medical professionals calling code blue, the old man was animated – responsive even, to the growing concern of the staff flooding in to witness the strange miracle as my mother lay unconscious, never to experience the shock of what was unfolding.

What a shock it was – death canceled for the foreseeable future. Considering the political climate, it was likelier than not that a shooting would've occurred that day, but what made the news was the casualty count. 26 injured including the shooter, none dead. The shooter got it the worst, of course – a barrage of law enforcement's finest ordinance. But what about the woman who was missing half of a head? Indeed, a miracle. Twenty-six miracles wrapped in a tragedy. Many of them had lost enough blood to be considered medically dead. Only they weren't. They were still moving. Those with punctured lungs were still breathing, or at least performing whatever cruel approximation of it their mangled flesh could allow. Hundreds of these miracles, multiplying in the following days. Miracles are relative though – those with intact brains and nervous systems could still feel pain. The hospital's backdoor to the grave-

yard was permanently shut, and the demands from the loved ones of those who should be dead crowded out those of the living. After all, that cancer might not kill you. That gash might get infected but you'll live. No matter what, you'll live. Across the wire, around the globe, headlines confirmed: Death has ended.

My mother had another stroke three weeks later, this time at home; her status was upgraded considering the current 'health crisis' and the rush to treat her no longer existed. It appeared like the second one completely wiped out whatever lights were left on upstairs, which would've likely triggered the D.N.R. clause in her living will. No such luck. Meanwhile, people were wondering if they needed to drink water or eat anymore. Thinkpieces were pouring out about the ethics of just burning the people who were more so now animated piles of flesh than living, conscious beings. A man cut off his arm on a livestream. It appeared to still move under his control, although it was immediately believed to be a hoax. People don't believe their eyes anymore.

I was unsure what to do about mom. There were pretty clear directives against mortifying the flesh of the 'still-living' – the workaround to avoid using 'undead' or the 'z' word – with untold amounts of venture capital pouring into startups that sought to capitalize on the new life-death paradigm. I cut myself preparing myself and mom a meal – I still fed her, although I probably didn't have to – and let myself bleed out onto to counter to see if I could make it move. One of the guys in my complex shot his wife seven times, one of the first foolish enough to try to see if they could skirt murder charges. He didn't, and his wife would testify against him; the jury sought it fitting to still charge him with murder in the first

degree, considering the blood lost. I told my mom about it and she didn't say anything.

Things got bad in the apartments in general. Federal and state aid were being diverted to solve the crisis. With the healthcare system buckling under the weight of just trying to manage the pain of endlessly-metastasizing cancer patients and gurgling, mangled car-crash victims, disability checks got pulled. Instead of the usual medicare and social security checks, I got a letter informing me that mom would have to make an appointment to see if she still qualifies as a legally living individual. It didn't seem like anyone else in the low-income housing units were faring any better. One woman, fed up at the screaming of her nearly-starving kids, decided to confront a postal worker about someone stealing her mail. A few more neighbors got involved. No one would die in the altercation, although the badly beaten form the police dragged out of the dumpster might've preferred otherwise.

A startling development occurred when a man, likely fed up with something, came sailing down the side of the Frasier building in Danbury and abstracted his form across a rarely-used alleyway. It wasn't until a week later than an unlucky custodian came across the results. The curious part came after the cops and cleanup crew – the remains, although appearing to contain no animating force, had not begun to decompose. Videos of the wriggling bits of gristle made their rounds across social media. At first it just looked like maggots – there were a bunch around – until I saw the parts of his face dancing alongside them in a close up, thought of Olive, and felt my stomach heave.

When I was seven, our cat Olive ran away. Mom told me

she was just exploring and she'd be back with a treat for us. It was the fall – I remember the oak leaves crunching beneath my feet as I ambled through what seemed then to be an endless forest behind my home (development having shrunk what was already not more than twenty acres into a thin strip of trees separating my childhood home's backyard from the low-income houses we currently live in) and found Olive's matted fur split by a writhing mass of maggots. Those bugged me the most, and I'd wake up crying every night for a week. Bill told me that they weren't scary, that death was a natural part of life, that those little grubby things were nature taking Olive back. Mom broke up with him over that. She'd had a hard enough time explaining dad to me. Dad wasn't as hard as Olive, though. I didn't really know him.

I stopped reading the news early on, and avoided the internet pretty shortly afterwards; this one guy on Reddit said he ate some of his friend's leg and could hear his thoughts. There was a lot of spooky stuff like that everywhere – the religious cried everything from apocalypse, to a second coming, to God being dead, and for once, the rationally-minded didn't have more than doubt to offer. I'm sure scientists were working around the clock trying to figure it out. Mom once thought I could've been a scientist, then a filmmaker, then a lawyer, and then after I dropped out, maybe I could get into computers. She only took me to church on holidays until she didn't. I was always creeped out by the Jesus statues and the stations of the cross. It would've probably been interesting to go see what they had to say – how do you sell Heaven and threaten Hell if the doors to both are closed? – but the Eucharist thing might've made me gag after the leg guy.

It took well over two months before I could get someone from the state to come by and assess mom; the lady looked tired and I didn't blame her. It took less than five minutes and a cursory glance at the living situation to assess that, while she might suffer for lack of food or special care, she didn't seem responsive enough to register suffering. So, she would make a note in her file but close it until policy caught up with reality. I wanted to ask about my SSI benefits but it was easier to not; I had stopped eating more than once a week while trying to stretch mom's savings out. It was surprising how little you ruminate about past failures when you're hungry. Mom still needed to eat, so I needed to get a job.

The interview went a lot better than I'd imagined. All they asked me was if I could work 40 hours and lift 50 pounds. It was nice to get out of the house and they let me keep one earbud in while I was working. I was surprised how little actually had changed – from the bits of small talk I had with some of the older forklift guys, you would've never known that anything was going on. It was nice having a routine – wake up at 9, wash and feed mom, work from 11-10, feed and wash mom, and then some video games until around 1 or 2. I had three days off to play games and care for mom and I even went to the store instead of ordering groceries some days. Both of us were eating.

I'd only been in one car crash before, and it was my fault: the summer after I dropped out, I chased a handful of mom's Xanax with a Four Loko to drum up the courage to drive straight into the I-25 divider. I missed the mark and flipped my little SUV; when I came to consciousness, a nurse was sticking a needle into my arm to draw blood while a cop was talking to some guy in a suit. They'd

seen the note I wrote out in lipstick on the rear window and they definitely had to charge me but it seemed like the hospital would've been preferable to the jail; I only spent one night in jail before driving me to Discovery House. Mom was there and I wished she'd have looked happier to see me alive.

This time it was in October, and the leaves hadn't started to change. I was on my way home from work in mom's car when I hit something. This time, I was dead sober, so at least I didn't have to worry about legal fees. I knew the deer should have been dead – it couldn't even hold up its head after it dislodged its side from the crumpled metal of my front passenger side and staggered halfway across the road before collapsing – and the cops that showed up said I was lucky to not be, although I don't think that idiom is relevant anymore. I forgot to pay the insurance for mom, so I got a ticket. The tow truck driver was nice enough to drive me home.

I felt terrible after totaling the car and couldn't bring myself to call a service so I stopped going to work. My manager called for a couple days and texted me not to bother to come in on the third. Someone left a note on the door saying the stay on evictions would be lifted soon and to call the senator about it, but I didn't know the senator and felt too tired to do much more than to feed and clean mom. I got back on the internet to try to get ideas of what to do for work and things had gotten worse; no wonder the guys with grandkids didn't talk about it. Empty buildings full of the still-living, protestors screaming about the value of life and the privilege of death, a mortician arrested for operating an illegal crematory, calls for ethical cannibalism, an immediately-deleted but endlessly-discussed video of a decapitated head attempting to speak, the

mass import of fentanyl to keep the still-living pain free as tumors twice the size of their necks press on their spinal column, millions of words cataloging minute-by-minute the unraveling of life as we know it with a delirious sense of expectation and hope: what does it mean? What will it mean? I missed so much and none of it was clear. My stomach felt rotten but I hadn't eaten.

One of my earliest memories – probably my first, because the older ones I just remember glimpses of – is a nightmare I had when I was 5 or 6. I was always really nervous around the other kids, and in the dream, I'm having a hard time with one in a version of my school that didn't make sense. The part that stuck happened right before I woke up. Mom was waiting for me on the sidewalk – I was always the most happy to see her then because she almost never came to pick me up – and I waved at her to come. The ground in between us and the sidewalk didn't exist, so when she stepped forward, she fell onto a spiked conveyor belt on the bottom and her impaled body just crept away. I woke up immediately, tears streaming, and screamed for her. She came in and held me for a while, saying everything was going to be okay, that she wasn't going anywhere anytime soon.

I got the idea to eat her around Thanksgiving. The leaves had finally started to change and fall – some guy on X told me I was dumb to think that all of the trees die every year – and the people yelling squatters rights in the complex came home to a line of firetrucks and a smoldering unit. Sixteen families are displaced, including the two main organizers', with the cause of the fire well within the rental associate's coverage. Our unit had the second largest number of deadbeat tenants, so it was only a matter of time

before they smoked us out. There was probably a warrant out for me; I never showed up to court following the insurance ticket. Mom had been the same, unmoving and unmovable, but I was in a pretty bad way mentally and physically, just hungry all of the time. I didn't want to eat her because I was hungry, though – I could stand the pain, that's what Dr. Lawson always told me – but I knew it was only going to get worse without a home. I could open her eyes and look in and there'd be no one looking back. She always talked about her DNR clause – put a pillow over her head if you need to – and she never wanted to be cremated. I didn't believe the people who were saying that you could absorb another person if you ate them – people tell stories on the internet – and if I did, I wouldn't. I'd feel pretty terrible if I could hear what she thought about it. Anyway, I had to be sure she was truly dead before I butchered her, so I put the toilet tank lid over her chest and filled the tub. She spent six hours still underwater before I drained it and found her body still possessed the warmth of life, and I discovered that I could take a life. I lost my appetite and did not wish to continue.

A week later, still starving, I got a call from the state. Apparently, the Danbury authorities weren't too careful about keeping remains separated, and the still-living puddle of the man who leaped from the Frasier building mixed with other 'biological material' and seemingly became responsive to stimuli. (Or at least more responsible than before.) One of the 'still-living homes' – a repurposed elementary school in Hague's County – was similarly negligent in separating the remains and yielded similar observations. In fact, the closer together the unconscious still-living are packed, there seems to be a dim, shared consciousness formed between the flesh. Policymakers are excited by the possible solution – almost a best case, in

Senator Greise's opinion, all things considered – and mom is a candidate for one of the newer, more compact still-living spaces. They don't seem to need any care. They seem to be happy being next to the others. They wriggle around more. Some make noise, vocal chords vibrating in rich harmony. They are breathing but they do not need air. One man claimed to see a flicker of recognition in his wife's remaining eye. The tumors seem to recede. You'd never need to visit. You'd be a candidate yourself. We're looking to the future.

We'll be growing. Living forever. Nothing needs to end.

Above a flickering chain-hung bulb, a solitary orb weaver makes her meal of a wayward fly. Below, her roommate, Charlie, eyes her with wonder and hums along to the dotted drip-drops from the faucet, real freak shit these drops, playing some jazzed-up non-diatonic scale. Maybe after he gets back tonight maybe he'll bring his guitar in the bathroom and strum along. He sits on the toilet for an unmeasurable unit of time, an hour-or-so stretching and turning like the crack in his linoleum expanding from the foot of the tub, into the widest crevasse he's ever seen, like the Grand Canyon or something, and how big would his foot be if the floor was the expanse of the Colorado Plateau, and the spider eats behind the sun, watching the saucers zip across the sky, leaving contrails of bright green light.

He discovers legs, uses them, and dares a look into the mirror. His eyes spin wide like the crazy UFOs going across the room, and his mouth parts in quiet laughter and gets real wide, wide as the Hudson Valley itself. Fingers widen his eyelids and the big black pupil saucers zip out from his face and zig-zag and swirl towards the back of the vanity, right over the little shoe-polish looking thingamajig Davey gave him after he finished with the hatchback. His hands appear massive as they fumble for the tin, twist the thinger open, scoop out great globs of silvery goop, and rub it all over his white-eyed, silently hysterical face, making it like theirs, and though no air escapes his lungs he imagines his laughter louder than Basie's on Good Friday, so loud that the bums out back are kicking at his earlobes to quiet down, but in here, only he and the weaver can hear.

Elsewhere, Richard Thomas Blackwood's face comes into relief as the fog clears from his bathroom mirror, his pearl-handled straight razor halfway through its daily work. His deep-set, dark-lidded chestnut eyes avoid meeting their reflection, the only tell in his otherwise sphinx-like demeanor that he still might possess some measure of shame. Both sets of eyes raise and lock, and the man Richard Thomas Blackwood stares at the mahogany-framed, lightly-patinated portrait of his well-heeled, polished form. He rinses his face and wipes the blade clean.

SPIDER HAS DROPPED—
A MERE POOL OF PUTRESCENCE ON THE SLABS; CRUSHED.
THE MIST IS FALLING AND A MIST IS RISING
THE MANIFESTATION BEGINNING .

THE WILL OF R.T. BLACKWOOD

THE VOLUPTUOUS LANGUOR—

The grounds of the Blackwood estate sprawl for hundreds of acres, sloping down from a densely forested hillside onto a flat, partially wooded plain, home to patches of farmland and the estate's structures, the main house an hours walk (or a brief drive) off a winding country road which, if taken, seems to lead in a straight line to Yonkers. Dressed now in early-fall rustic wear, Blackwood strolls at a deliberate, measured pace along a path lined with yellowing beeches and oaks, a rhythm that remains unbroken as an unsteady voice behind him calls out: "Uncle!"

A young man, clad in similar attire (and unable to fill it), hustles to meet Blackwood's pace. By course, upon reaching him, he remains to the left and some feet behind as he matches stride. By course, a harried Thomas Samuel Blackwood is acknowledged only verbally.

"Where is my shovel?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't think to bring—"

"Who would you be addressing, boy?" The elder Blackwood rarely cuts off his nephew (even amid his most inane, imbecilic, circuitous, callous, and asinine emissions), signaling a rare severity to the 18-year-old.

"I'm sorry, sir, I didn't think—"

"And what possible business is it of mine what you think? Hm?"

Deflated, Thomas lags. Another knot forms in his brow.

"You have come for a purpose. State it."

"The DuPlait, sir—it's been fifty days." Thomas catches up to his uncle, and some time passes; the sky begins to turn overcast, the crocheted cover of altocumulus clouds flattening out into a rippled gray sea. To spite the cold silence, he tries to fill it. "The Du—"

"Then I shall ask you again—where is my shovel?"

THEN THE HAND.

Some locals, unaware of its inhabitants' pedigree, refer to the grounds as the Blackwood farm; unusually for a farm, its arable land stands devoid of crops. The only features existing in this stretch of acreage are a scattered number of dirt mounds marked with wooden staves. One, with 'DUPLAIT' carved vertically near the top, sits alongside the hole Thomas digs under the smoldering

gaze of his uncle. Eyeing a foot's progress, he instructs his nephew further.

"Your hands, now. Expect to be dealt back any damage done to that glass."

Carefully, Thomas sets down his uncle's shovel, kneels before the hole, and digs like a wounded hound, unearthing a soil-coated mason jar. With only a glance's instruction, he wipes clean the glass with the bottom of his vest and offers it up to his uncle's calloused hands.

Blackwood's palms work further to clear grime off the surface, revealing the milky, brown, viscous fluid within the jar. For a stretch, he rotates the container and inspects the movement of its contents.

"Does it look good, sir?" Thomas brushes dirt from his trousers into the hole before him, sore legs hoping for the affirmative.

"That remains to be seen." Blackwood's gaze stays within the Duplait jar, eyes trained to never show doubt, twin two-way mirrors. Behind them: vast, multi-colored plains scarred with sigils only visible from a looking glass atop a massive obsidian obelisk, wherein his unbounded form treads slowly across a gold-marbled black floor, geometries crystalizing and evaporating with each step, the face of Duplait in relief before him, speaking the recipe for life in his lisped, Balkan-accented French dialect, each word formed and reformed in Latin, Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, Enochian, Lemurian, into languages never spoken or conceptualized, into mathematical formulas only consistent with the logic of worlds guarded by Choronzon, burnt in mauve in great rings around the tower. Flakes of silver fall from hazy, purple skies devoid of any light to make them shimmer.

THE GOD OF FEAR IS NEAR, YES.

Thomas's dislike for mid-October stems from his boyhood on his uncle's estate; putting aside the elder's manner, he'd become unsettled as summer evenings live with the wondrous cacophony of cicadas and crickets turned dry and quiet. He would wonder why it took so long for mother to return for him, and how many more summer-into-autumns he'd be required to stay under her brother's cruel stewardship, and how many more verbal, physical, and psychic lashings he'd need endure until his becoming was complete and he, Thomas the boy, would be Thomas the Man, the Man her and the other Men in the family (and his and their rectors and even the prefects in between their ritualistically applied abuses) always spoke of in reverent tones. Then, there were the green lights in the forest that would appear as the same color left the leaves, glowing in pairs, the ones Uncle Richard Thomas would always dismiss as eyeshine – owls, foxes, opossums, small game.

Trailing behind him at a leisurely stroll, his uncle's guest – the tall, thin, self-possessed Mary – only harbors a dislike for men like Thomas. She did find it amusing to make him carry her stilettos – God, Richard would summon her up to some farm like this on a Tuesday without giving her a hint of consideration – and take as luxurious of a pace as her beneficiary would permit, especially after such a drive and a five-minute walk up some leaf-strewn, tick-ridden path to what appeared to be nothing but a barn – they didn't even take the fork towards the nice house poking above the treeline, just a dirt path to a ruddy old barn on a ruddy old farm on a ruddy old Tuesday. "Your uncle's got a real thing about him, you know that?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Don't 'ma'am' me — makes me feel like somebody's aunt. Who drilled those manners into you?"

Fists tighten. "I apologize, miss."

"Two hours in the car to meet him in a barn. The man's out of his tree."

"He's alright, miss."

Now, this is rich: "Look at you, sticking up for him when he's the one grinding you down. How bad did he break you?"

He thinks back to the last time he saw those green lights, nearly a decade ago. Having asked an instructor earlier about eyeshine and how it works, he would implore there was no light to have cast back on his late evening stroll, that it couldn't be animals, and without providing or being provided an alternative, was simply chastised for walking in the dark without a torch.

"See? Can't even speak up. He pays well — has to, if you catch my drift." Mary leans against the barn she supposes is where this lunatic wants her and withdraws a cigarette from a pink, quilted clutch bag. She sets expectant eyes on Thomas. "Well? You lighting me up or not?"

He withdraws a brass-plated lighter from his vest pocket and offers up the flame. Mary takes a pull and returns something like kindness.

"What a gentleman. Not bad-looking, either. Call me when you grow up into something like a man. Maybe I'll cut you a deal."

In quiet reassurance to himself, he mutters, "I am a man."

Mary – the woman, *that whore*, laughs in a way unbefitting of her station and willfully disrespectful of his, setting him aflame. In a quick motion, he snatches the cigarette out of her hand and

throws it to the ground.

"My uncle doesn't like to wait, ma'am."

What little good cheer left present drains from her softly-angled 30-year-old features, leaving sharp contempt. "You're bound to end up just like him — minus the guts. Nothing but a soft little worm waiting to be stepped on. He's a bastard, but at least he's a man." She spits on the ground between them. "Shoes, boy. Then get lost."

"IT'S ALL IN THE EGG"

Davey nearly gets them pinched in Westchester (even though Charlie was the one hanging out of the side window tossing painted eggs at passing motorists) when he skids into an Esso station, activates the lights, and does his whole *wee-woo I-come-in-peace schtick* to the freaked-out attendant, pressing his face against the glass, even asking if they had enough grease in the frier to get them back to Alpha Centauri, and it's funny as hell 'cause the second cubes were coming on but even Charlie could make out the chick was about to call down the heat and since they got a whole valley to spread peace to he hits the horn and Davey cuts the shit.

They have enough fuel to get to the field to activate the beacon and call the mothership, and even though the roads are real wavy on the map, Charlie's eyes keep focus on a little patch of green up north, outside any town, and when he closes them he can feel the vehicle lift off the ground. He opens them back up and sees the traces of Davey's facepaint left on the glass swirl over the attendant's face, making her look like a Venusian. He hopes she's not lonely, stuck in her form, yearning to be free from the dream all people are made to dream together. They lift off over the trees, into

the dying afternoon sky, laughing out great pink-orange waves of positivity that ripple like the yellowing leaves of the trees below.

THE LATTICES OPEN.

Mary's cool blue eyes settle and adjust to the warmly illuminated interior of the barn; cedar-paneled walls and two parallel rows of candles draw her gaze to the wall opposite the entrance, centered with a glass-paneled door that separates out a dry sauna. A small gasp escapes as she notices a large pentagram drawn in charcoal on the floor before her, itself also pointing towards the sauna's cracked entrance. Blackwood's steady baritone escapes from the darkness within.

"Mary, Mary, quite contrary."

She rolls her eyes and withdraws another cigarette from her clutch. "Very funny, Dick. You gonna be a gentleman for once and offer me a light?"

The sauna door creaks and Blackwood's form emerges as nakedly as it did from the womb, save for a fine-leather shoulder holster and the well-maintained, 20-year-old Browning P35 it concealed. Chomping on an unlit, pre-embargo Partagás, he carries a glowing ember from the sauna in his bare right hand.

The sight is at first bizarre enough to warrant a chuckle from Mary, quickly stifled by concern as he lifts the coal towards her face to light her smoke. Somewhat entranced, she pulls in deeply as Blackwood ignites his own and tosses the coal into a brass receptacle by the sauna door with a soft, resonant *clank*.

Mary's concern lingers. "Doesn't that hurt?"

"No sensation. I came back from the islands with a Purple Heart and a party trick."

"Some stunt." She ashes on the floor, souring. "Some place you got here, too." She scans the room again, slightly overwhelmed by the heat and smell of warm cedar, suffocating in the long silence as R.T.'s dark eyes stay cloaked in shadow. "Some nephew. What's the matter with that kid?"

"No reason to fret. The boy is due to be sent to the jungle the moment he is of age." Each comment is punctuated by a small, unconscious puff on his cigar, as if he's attempting to pull the words back in. "The war will make a man of him."

"Or he'll end up dead. You don't worry about these boys?"

"Do you? Join the WACs."

Mary rolls her eyes and turns from Blackwood, taking carelessly measured steps around the small barn. "So you took me all the way up here to stand around and gawk at you and your two peckers in a dingy barn?" Unconsciously, she stops at the edge of the pentagram. Her thoughts drift like the soft cover of smoke, "Where are we, anyway?"

"Dutchess County. The closest village is Red Hook."

"Yeah, I wish I was in Red Hook." She begins walking again, in a circle around the perimeter, at a clip closer to a pace. "Isn't this around where they saw those flying saucers back in '56?"

"Close enough. Hyde Park."

"It's all the same backwoods." Mary's walk is halted before her lips close, R.T.'s charcoal-scarred hand now tight around her wrist.

"Wrong. These are my backwoods." Blackwood's grasp loosens. He twirls her body away from her and wraps his other arm around her waist, pulling her close.

Mary breaks free and turns around to face him, leaning her

weight back against the warm wooden wall. She flashes a contemptuous smile, the one she knows he pays for. "Look at you, Emperor Dick, king of the hicks. You wore your nicest clothes for me."

"Look at you." He steps forward, boxing her in against the wall. "Mary Magedelin of Brooklyn." Mary flashes her tongue out at the remark, and her neck tenses as his hand rises toward it, relaxing somewhat as it only lightly traces the nape, his index finger catching her gold chain and pulling up the medallion of St. Christopher obscured below a pink charmeuse neckline. "Why are you wearing this?"

"It's my mother's. I always wear it when I travel."

"I told you never to wear it."

"You told me never to wear my cross." Almost to punctuate his point, he yanks the chain, snapping against the back of her neck, and tosses it to the side. In equal parts disbelief and furor, Mary poises herself to slap him. "You jer—."

All attempts at a rebuff are strangled as Blackwood's rough hand grasps her throat and applies enough pressure to free the cigarette from between her fingers. It's snuffed by his calloused, bare foot. "That is better." His entire face is dark, his form eclipsed by the ochre dance of candlelight illuminating the space. Mary's eyes sparkle, watering, pleading in fear, and it isn't until he finds them widening past all previous experience that he loosens his grip.

Her skinny frame collapses back against the wall, sliding down, heaving for oxygen. In a moment of dissociation, she's brought back to the freak who hired her and took her to the coffee club, *Lonnie or something like that?*, and maybe it was the music or the grass but when he started going on about prana or whatever the hindus call it, this life force that was just her breath, she could

feel it with every inhale and exhale that night, and while she barely thought about it since, she hadn't been with anyone as into gagging a woman as Dick since. "I swear to god, Dick. This is the last time you pull something like that."

Smiling like a jackal, Blackwood offers his unfeeling right hand. "You'll swear to me, dear."

IS IT FEAR?

Thomas sits crosslegged on a spruce stump, having just added a third piece of footwear to the pile beside him. He frees his right foot from the woolen sock encasing it, revealing a set of four normal-looking toes giving stark relief to a deep-blue pinky toe bulging over a tightly-wound piece of butcher's string. He winces a bit as he tries to gain purchase on the loose end, and having it clenched between dirt-bedded fingernails, slowly begins to unwrap the string. He brings it to his nose and takes in the smell, savoring the labor of the day and the cheese-like odor of the filmy substance coating it.

He had so long imagined he would just go ahead and cut it off. His uncle wouldn't need know, no strings would need to be pulled to ensure he still serves as an officer, just walk into the physical examination, take off his shoes, and ask the examiner to count to ten. He could travel— Uncle Richard Thomas's war stories, those bloody jaunts through Europe like it was a thrillseeker's tourist package, finding like-minded wicked fools, what's the difference?— and attempt to trade on his name well-enough to find a quiet position somewhere with a nice lady with big brown eyes, a position of earned respect, social influence, men's clubs, dinners with magazine editors and soon-to-be coworkers, contribute to society, raise a

family, get an au pair to help but that's it, no other help, just one by one the discs making up his spinal column built like they used to be built, except Thomas had found he quite enjoyed the sensation of the string, and if he lost one of the ten toes, it was only a matter of time before he took it too far with the next one, so his life going forward was to be as Uncle, Mother, and all the family's men (especially Judge J.T. Benedict-Blackwood) willed it: Second Lieutenant, possibly stationed in Hawaii, with ten toes to wrap until they tingle and rot and every step becomes a spark in the fire to forge Thomas to meet the greatness of his station.

Thomas hides the string in his vest pocket and begins to redress his foot. The light of day wanes, the final warm tones of dusk falling past the horizon, and night takes its purchase in the cover of the hemlock treeline in the distance. His eyes drift around the landscape until they freeze on a pair of green orbs glowing in the distant undergrowth.

DOES PAN STRIKE THE GONG?

Rubbing her neck, Mary scans the flooring for her medallion, unconsciously avoiding the pentagram in the middle. Having mindfully avoided looking at the heel, she's lightly startled as Richard emerges from the sauna's darkness, holding a polished half-gallon glass container filled with some kind of weird sludge. She tries and fails to hold in a loud, half-snorted laugh. "What the hell is that? A jar of shit?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. Wheat germ from New York's finest fields, married to a French vintage, left to rot in deer droppings for three days... then strained, sealed, and set aside with fresh dung for fifty more."

"And what exactly am I supposed to do with it?"

"Nothing. You'll do what I pay you to do — and what passes from me into you goes into this jar. Understand?"

Her lips part, delaying a response as she processes the request. "So I do what I come here to do, and then I get to piss out your magic potion into a jar of shit?"

"You've always had such a lovely way with words." A plume of fresh smoke obscures his face as he nurses his cigar. "Thomas has done his duty by me. Now he will do his duty by his country. He will return a man or a corpse; either way, I will have no further use for him."

"You're so goddamn theatrical, like one of the queens on St. Marks, you know that? Will you shut up and let me do my job or do you have a point arriving soon? The last train to the city leaves at 2 and I'm not spending my night in a hot barn."

"Very well." Blackwood places the jar carefully on the ground outside of the pentagram. "Do you know what a homunculus is?"

"Do I want to? Looks like a terrible drink." She leans back against the wall again, arms folded, eyes drawn into the settling darkness within the glass.

"I was back in France this summer, and became reacquainted with a gentleman I'd met briefly during my tour named DuPlait. He offered the recipe for a thousand francs. I thought he was as mad as you think I am until he introduced me to his. A pitiful, crooked whelp, not unlike the boy outside but entirely devoid of any soul or spirit. Livestock in the shape of a man, and a lifetime of servitude for what seemed to be a pittance."

"You're crazier than I know you are if you think a person's

gonna pop out of that jar." The brattish levity in her character barely remains, leaving credulity and disgust.

"If it doesn't," he lowers himself to the ground, sitting within the perimeter of the five-pointed seal. "I'm going back to Lyon to shoot those two men in the face." He cracks open the lid, and a horrid odor overtakes the space.

Mary nearly gags, her eyes watering. "Ugh, no, Dick, I can't do it with that smell."

"You're going to have to. You can find my handkerchief and some aromatic oils by the sauna door. Do what you must." He goes fully supine, extending his limbs along the pentacle, eyes blazing, lingam erect for ritual. "Take off your underwear. Mount me until I'm finished, then immediately deposit into the jar."

The sandalwood oil does little to mask the smell, and while Mary can barely look at Blackwood in his bizarre Vitruvian man pose, she does as he commands, sliding down her panties, lowering herself onto him, and just as many have before, they proceed to make a life.

THE LATTICE CLOSED.

The green lights fade, and Thomas is left with a chill as the warmth of the day is spirited away in the October evening. As he thinks it nearly past time to return to the field, his uncle and his guest emerge from the barn, fully clothed, the former holding his jug of nonsense and the latter waving an unlit cigarette in his direction. "Give me a light and get me back to the city, you twerp."

R.T. interjects with a flash of flint. "In time, dear. I need the boy to bury this before it gets dark."

"Dick, it is dark-"

"Uncle!"

A rare, unprompted interjection from his sister's cur. Blackwood tersely entertains, "Yes?"

"I saw the lights out there again. The green ones."

"Like light reflecting off an owl's corneas?" The phrase has a hypnotic, oft-repeated tone, one that jolts Mary into a stark sense of unreality.

"What lights, Dick?"

Another click, and Blackwood's lighter is fully brandished, illuminating the alcove in front of the barn. He relights his cigar, and the flame is nearly bright enough to show the red in Thomas's face. "Mary, stay here or come with us for a stroll. The choice is yours." He withdraws the fire and starts down the path towards the field.

"I'm not hanging around out here alone with the owls. I'm coming with." Mary picks up her heels from the ground, forces them back into Thomas's arms, and takes a defiant stride behind Richard.

Halting, burning, his young nephew is moved to follow suit: "Boy, my shovel!"

THE SPIDER DROPPED FROM THE LEDGE

The waxing sliver of the hunter's moon peers above a hemlock grove, where from the foliage's darkness, Blackwood, Mary, and Thomas enter the tract of open land where the Duplait jar originally lie. Dusk at its end, the dark form of R.T. ends their march at a flagged stave jutting from a patch of clover.

"Here, dig."

Mary looks out to the expanse of the field; it seems to

stretch out forever into darkness. Not a cricket to be heard, only the light rustling of breeze through the treetops, until Thomas breaks with a soft crush. Anxious, and unable to make out any of Richard's features, she pleads. "Dick, are we going to get back now?"

A flash of green light briefly blinds her vision.

Blackwood turns to the source, a stunned silhouette against the bright beams before him. The mere color of the light causes Thomas to fall to the ground and clench his entire body inwards.

Mary's eyes adjust to see a smaller, humanoid figure standing between the lights and Richard, waving what look like arms above its head. Both it and the lights appear to be creeping towards the trio, along with the intense odor reminding Mary of Coney Island As it draws closer, its suit (or its skin) appear to be glowing a silvery green, illuminated by the light behind it. In a high-pitched, nearly hysterical voice, it calls to them.

"Humans! Do not be frightened! I have come to deliver you a message from the Alpha Cluster-"

With a loud pop, the figure halts and collapses. Mouth agape, Mary sees Blackwood lower his pistol. Her eyes adjust further, and those twin dazzling lights illuminated the body before them, appearing to be nothing more than some acid freak in a silver jumpsuit.

The lights stop their approach, and the sound of a car door opening serves as a prelude to another three cracks from the pistol, one hitting the metal, one hitting glass, and one hitting whoever withdrew from the drivers seat.

Blackwood turns toward his nephew and honored guest, one cowering above a hole he should've dug by now and the other washed in green and frozen in horror. He does not holster his

weapon, but as his gaze shifts from Mary back to it, she takes off in a sprint back towards the treeline.

Instinctively, he lines up his shot and squeezes the trigger, only to hear a hollow, choking clack from the jammed Browning, its slide frozen an inch back. *Kraut rubbish.* He kicks his nephew in his side; Thomas howls in pain and releases his grasp on the shovel. Blackwood takes it in both hands and takes chase.

"Come back, Mary, I am not going to hurt you."

Almost thirty years of survival, all for this? Buried in a field with some burn outs and a bottle of shit?

Her thoughts outpace her legs. Her pursuer outpaces them. She can only fling herself wildly into the blackness, his woods, his despair, the growing sound of his boots, *pater noster*, her hand in her mother's as she took her last breath, *qui es in caelis*, praying the rosary with her at the hospice in St. Mary's, *sanctificetur nomen tuum*, feeling his breath curdle her skin, *fiat voluntas tua*—

Both stop. A pair of glowing green lights flicker from the darkness of the wood, perhaps owl catching the light of the stranger's craft. In rhythmic succession, several more appear in the treeline, soon becoming dozens, if not hundreds of beings dotted along the middle distance.

Blackwood's composure breaks. *Impossible.*

Mary turns to face him, eyes panicked. Blackwood's vision goes completely white, and after what seems like an eternity coil-folded into an instant, his eyes open to find Mary and every pair of green lights on the horizon gone. Only the painted-over headlights of Davey and Charlie's hatchback remain.

Withdrawing a monogrammed handkerchief, Blackwood wipes his face, and regains his poise. He hollers for his nephew, only to find the coward took off into the night, frightened by lights and visions. Nothing but owls and illusions out there, creatures of his domain, complicit in a whore's trick to elude him. Thomas and the unexpected visitors could be dealt with at dawn. Standing tall, in ground consecrated by his blood and bound by his will, **Richard Thomas Blackwood digs a hole.**

OPENING RITUAL. . .
PRANAYAMA EXERCISE. . .
PLANETARY BANISHING. . .
DECLARATION OF AUTHORITY. . .

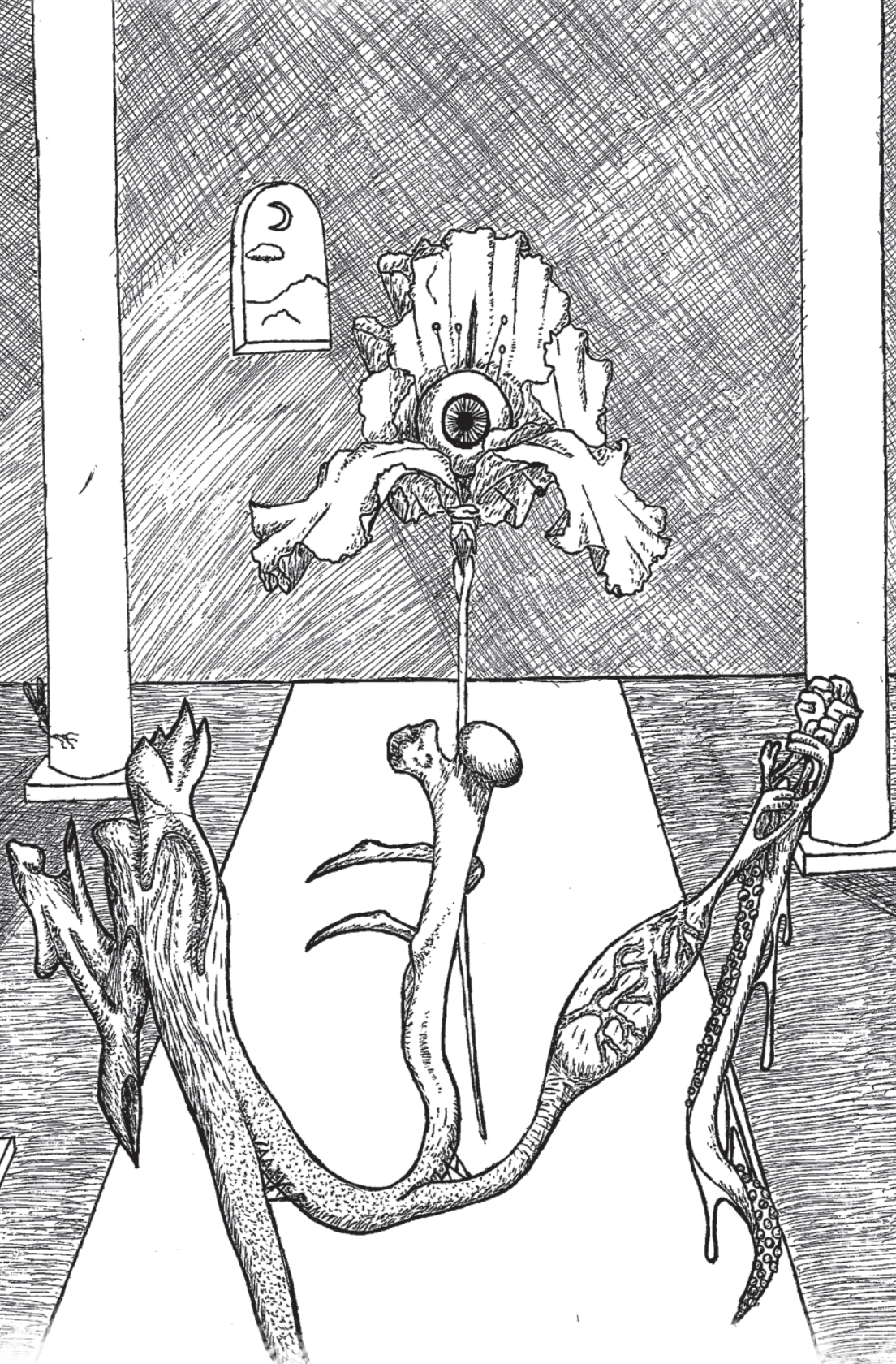
RITUAL OF THE PENTAGRAM
MIDDLE PILLAR
LESSER RITUAL OF THE HEXAGRAM
BORNLESS/HEADLESS RITE

CONSECRATION:

Raise one's creative energy to the crown chakra and enter an ecstatic state. During this exercise, visualize the sigil or use it as a point of focus. For the duration, vibrate the mantra: **FEPIUPC**.

Immediately before reaching the maximum energetic threshold, take a deep breath. Imagine the sigil collapsing into a single point of light. Hold the breath, maintaining this single-pointed focus for a minimum of four seconds. Exhale while vibrating **FEPIUPC** one final time.

Imagine your breath as a bright light. Release all accumulated energy with the final exhalation and mantra. Visualize this breath, the mantra and its energy inflating the small point of light, forcing it to expand into the original talismanic image. It should glow radiantly.



Askin' Wayne

"Every year, my mother-in-law insists on 'blessing' the Thanksgiving turkey with what she claims is an 'old family prayer.' Last year, I caught her whispering in a language I didn't recognize while waving burning sage over the raw bird. Our neighbor even swore she saw her burying the leftover turkey bones in our backyard the morning after! My husband thinks I'm being ridiculous and claims that his mother is nothing but a lifelong, dyed-in-the-wool Polish Catholic, but I can't shake the feeling that she's been... hexing the meal. Am I being silly here? Do I confront her? Insist on preparing the bird myself this year? Or do I just eat it and hope for the best?"

—HEXED IN HARRISBURG

HEXED—First, I'd like to applaud you for your laser-like pursuit of consumption: your dedication to annually and ritualistically devouring this terrifying species of bird is inspiring to us all, and I so very will for you to retain its myriad abilities throughout the holiday season and the long, long winter months. Its aggressive, dominant aspect will suit you well in gathering territory and resources as your neighbors gnash and claw for scraps in their cold and inhospitable dens.

I understand why you may possess some trepidation regarding your mother-in-law's interference in the brutal and just subjugation of this gibbering and lewd fowl. Ask yourself: on the nights leading up to its slaughter, have you witnessed her whisper incantations into its hollow skull? Upon its beheading, after the gathering of the fluids, do you find its blood and bile smeared across your thresholds? Have you considered isntead trying grouse this year? It is a delightful alternative, and I recommend you purchase a freshly-frozen nine-pounder and all of your holiday feast's needs at **Wegmans**: "***find what decadent end awaits you at your local Wegmans.***"

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If you're able to confirm these suspicions, you'll need to take a measured and pragmatic approach to understanding the nature and limits of her *herexei*. First, are the effects of these bird rituals intended to protect her bastard spawn? Tonight, after providing your spouse an intoxicating meal of spiced meats and rind pudding, find your sharpest awl (careful not to use your ritual dagger!) and drive it directly into his left lung as he drifts to slumber. If the awl does **not** penetrate his flesh, proceed immediately to full immolation. Dishonesty in a relationship is **not** to be taken lightly.

Conversely, if you are able to fully penetrate his flesh, it's obvious that her foul workings were of a more nefarious nature. Proceed with full immolation of your spouse—don't worry, this ignorant, soulless familiar from whom she draws power is neither human nor her real offspring. Making sure it's still thickly coated in his blood, use the awl to carve a sigil of her name into the side of the turkey you've selected to butcher. Rub your (ex-)husband's ashes into the wound. [*Ed. note: Waxen does not endorse animal abuse, ritualistic or otherwise.*] This year, when she performs her 'old family prayer', the carcass will become animated with your husbandling's corrupted spirit, gobbing and chanting in a cruel mockery of his voice. This helpful tip will transfer all hexes back to her 36 times. Don't thank me too soon! You'll need to proceed immediately to immolating her and the turkey or a man will be born on Friday whose destined death is to collide with you in Sears parking lot.

Afterwards, if you're free on Thanksgiving evening, I'll be under the bridge you've dreamed about all of your life (the one that crumbles with every increasingly clumsy step you take across it), sharing expired tins of **Wegmans Own** cranberry relish with the horrifically disfigured boy you glimpsed at the beer hall in **Busch Gardens**, the only memory remaining of those otherwise pleasant childhood vacations. He's a hoot at Heads Up! **We'll see you there.**

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A dark piece of art?
Send Bev and Bob your weirdest and best at beverlybwix@gmail.com. We accept submissions year-round.

Need advice?
Send your darkest dilemmas to 'Waxen' Wayne at waxenwayne@gmail.com.

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BEV AND BOB WOULD LIKE TO THANK WAXEN'S CONTRIBUTORS FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE THEIR WONDROUS AND FRIGHTENING GIFTS WITH THE WORLD:

Robert E. Howard passed into history in 1936. Find out more about his life and legacy at **rehfoundation.org**.

Dustin Ray's dark, pastoral art can be found blowing about the dusty great plains of Oklahoma. Have Instagram? Might be easier to locate at **@deadweight.art**.

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The elusive Morgan Zoskia (and their enigmatic creation, R.T. Blackwood) pledge their return in future editions of Waxen.

Jukrek is a Ukranian national selling forgotten nightmares at **deviantart.com/jukrek**. Please support his efforts and existence.

Coco's alchemical dissections of the human form can be found on Instagram at **@cocomakhno**. Ask about their uncle Nestor.

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